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COMMUNITY, FAMILY, AND ZOMBIES IN *CARGO* (2017)

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"My town is broken.
From this view, I see the end.
Below, they gather."
Ryan Mecum *Zombie Haiku: Good Poetry for Your ... Brains*

Abstract

The zombie apocalypse is one of the widespread and popular tropes in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction and film. Having started out in the 1960s as the embodiment of abject horror, with overtones of reflections on consumerism and racism in American society, the zombie has grown in complexity to signify issues like isolation, self-doubt, identity crisis and environmental challenges in contemporary society. The present study is going to examine the themes of otherness, fatherhood and survival in the 2017 Australian film *Cargo*.

1 Introduction

The zombie apocalypse is one of the increasingly popular ways in which writers of fantasy, horror or science fiction envision humanity's end. "Terminal visions," as Warren Wagar (1982) calls these narratives, have been part of human culture as far back as cultural traditions go, with the Sumerian version of the story of the flood probably being the earliest literary example of the imagined large-scale destruction of the human race. The apocalypse as storyline is strewn across a wide range of genres, from mythologies and religious texts (like the Book of Revelations in the New Testament, or the various incarnations of Ragnarok in Norse mythology), to modern and contemporary genres like fantasy, horror or science fiction. Apart from the extrapolative, prophetic element "apocalypse [is] [...] one of the fictions which we employ to make sense of our present" (Seed, 2000, p.11). The present study is going to examine how the 2017 Australian film *Cargo* reflects on issues of community and isolation, survival and self-sacrifice, monstrosity and fatherhood, analyzing the film along the questions of identity loss, communication, and the divide along the ethnic lines of white / indigenous Australians.

2 From abject horror to intercultural communication: the monster in Western popular culture

In addition to providing a metaphorical language to address political, social, or cultural issues otherwise difficult to confront, narratives of the apocalypse also provide

a canvas upon which to project the individual or collective anxieties of a given time and place. Most of the stories reference traumatic experiences, and work on various levels to produce a complex tapestry of loss and desperation. H. G. Wells's aliens in *The War of the Worlds* are clear analogies of British colonial arrogance—Wells himself makes the connection in the opening chapter of the novel—, but the deep-seated fear of the fall of the British Empire is also encoded in the demise of the Martian invaders. The novel's narrator and protagonist, on the other hand, experiences the loss of home, friends and family, culminating in utter isolation within a dead and deserted London. The nuclear apocalypse envisioned in countless stories after World War II clearly maps the technophobia directed against the new weapons of mass destruction, especially as international and intranational tensions mount during the Cold War, just as the contemporaneous body snatcher narrative—where alien entities replace humans, especially those we love and cherish—comments on the fears of an impending Communist invasion, with friends and family not being what they pretend to be. These narratives, especially when told from a child's point of view as in Philip K. Dick's "The Father-Thing," turn the familiar into the site of possible mortal danger.

Many (post)apocalyptic narratives contain an element of the monstrous, acting as the focal point of the fears. These can be alien horrors, monstrous phenomena (climate catastrophes or extraterrestrial threats like asteroids), technological threats (evil robots or malevolent artificial intelligence), or biological death-bringers, depending on where the emphases lie within the given socio-cultural milieu that the narrative emerges from. Zombies have become one of the regular household items in this menagerie of horror. They belong to the category of monster which Noel Carroll (1990) remarks "are interstitial and/or contradictory in terms of being both living and dead: ghosts, zombies, vampires, mummies, the Frankenstein monster, Melmoth the Wanderer, and so on" (p.32). In a similar vein, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996, p.6) posits that the liminality of the monster signals a "category crisis," and its hybridity results in "a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (1996, p.6). Zombies, like vampires, werewolves and other similar beings are the monstrous as contained within the human body, a horrendous potential, so to speak, which is freed as a result of a transformation that ultimately leads to the loss of identity for the person involved. These monsters are also parasitic-or cannibalistic, if we acknowledge their human origin-, destroying not only their host, but also posing a danger to the wider human community: vampires feed on blood, werewolves and zombies on human flesh. The bite, the abnormal and cannibalistic entering of the human body, that usually effects the infection and subsequent transformation, has strong sexual overtones, and marks the monster as transgressive and abject in the sense of cultural taboo.

It is interesting to note that like many cultural icons these monsters have their peculiar development arc through the decades. The most notable example is the vampire, which started its career in European popular culture as the abject monster in Polydori's *The Vampyre* (1819), underwent a major change in the 1960s, and emerged as a metaphor for the marginalization and dehumanization of transgressive gender identity and sexual attraction, especially in Anne Rice's novels. This trajectory of humanization led to the merger with the Byronic hero in the 1980s to gradually produce figures like Angel from *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* or Edward from the *Twilight Saga*, exploring models of attraction and interaction for young adult readers and viewers. Finally, in films like the mockumentary *What We Do in the Shadows*, co-written and directed by Taika Waititi, the vampire community emerges as a more general type of cultural and personal otherness, as the film explores attempts at communication with and integration into the host culture of New Zealand.

The figure of the zombie is on a similar trajectory, although the range of issues the character may be able to address is slightly different from that of the

vampire. As the vampire has its roots in European folklore, the zombie "was a thing of mythology and folkloristic ritual, a much maligned and little understood voodoo practice primarily from the West Indian nation of Haiti" (Bishop, 2010,p.37). The modern zombie was born in 1968, and George Romero's low-budget horror film *The Night of the Living Dead* is often regarded as the origo and model for all subsequent films in the genre of the "zombie invasion narrative" (Bishop, 2010, p.94). Bishop (2010) posits that although Romero undeniably built on the preceding tradition of monster films, the resulting collage redefined the figure of the zombie "in four key respects: (1) they have no connection to voodoo magic, (2) they far outnumber the human protagonists, (3) they eat human flesh, and (4) their condition is contagious" (p.94). Condition four in particular opens up the genre to science fictionalization, that is, a process of rationalizing the incomprehensibly mysterious. These characteristics also integrate the zombie narrative into the wider group of the (post)apocalyptic texts, and as Bishop (2010) says, reiterating the critical consensus, the new zombies became "a metaphor for the modern age [...] present[ing] audiences with the true monster threatening civilization: humanity itself" (p.95). I would further argue that its peculiarities make this particular monster especially suited for commentary on individual trauma and questions of identity crisis and isolation, and will elaborate on this point further on. Interestingly *The Night of the Living Dead* had another aspect, which seems trivial today: Ben, the protagonist was played by African American actor Duane Jones. His character survives the apocalypse only to be mistaken for a zombie and shot dead at the end of the film. While casting an African American actor as the lead in an otherwise not African American themed film was not self-evident in the 1960s, the ending may also be decoded as a poignant commentary on race relations at the time.

The Romero zombie still embodied the abject monster, as it was devoid of anything usually associated with intrinsically being human. It lacked identity, memories, intelligence, and a living body, and was a human being reduced to a decomposing corpse animated by its cannibalistic desire for human flesh, which a number of critics, including Bishop (2010), have interpreted as a critique of American consumer society. Several films feature zombies hibernating until they get into proximity with their prey, further diminishing their 'life' and their agency to a simple reaction to living beings. Despite their seeming simplicity Romero's creatures engendered a whole new category of horror movie, and in the subsequent years the new archetype was established in global popular culture through countless iterations of the same theme. Since a well-known template lends itself more easily to subversive approaches, the zombie, as mentioned earlier, has been on a similar trajectory of humanization as the vampire, with comedic depictions appearing quite early on (Bishop, 2010, p.158). Yet until the 2010s the zombie element retained its basic dehumanized characteristics, in films like *28 Days Later* (2002), or *Zombieland* (2009), the focus remains on the humans, with the zombies acting as the Otherness that threatens to destroy the world as we know it.

Although many films and series retain the fundamental narrative structure of human survival versus zombie threat even today-it is enough to mention the immensely popular *The Walking Dead* (2010–) series, or films like *World War Z* (2013)-the 2010s saw a marked shift in the depiction of the monster. Series like *iZombie* (2015—), *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017-), or films like *Warm Bodies* (2013) and *The Girl With All The Gifts* (2016) opt for a more nuanced approach to the character, investing zombies with intelligence and memories, while upholding their bodily transformation and desire for flesh, to investigate questions of self, identity, battling with addiction, and trying to navigate as ostracized Other in contemporary society. Since the examples I mention above retain the zombie's threatening nature, these narratives also comment on the options human society in general, and individuals in particular, have in trying to

cope with changes that threaten to uproot the social order as we know it. Thus they present an opportunity to comment on global migration, climate change, isolation, interpersonal and intercultural communication, and other phenomena causing anxiety in present-day society.

3 Fatherhood, survival and community in *Cargo* (2017)

3.1 The apocalypse in Australian cinema

Australian cinema has its share of (post)apocalyptic movies, with the *Mad Max* films probably being the most well-known examples internationally. Using the Australian Outback as their setting, these films usually fall into the category of "survivalist fiction" (Edward James [2000, p.53] referencing and citing John Clute), which he explains as narratives set "in the backwoods of America," with social order atomized only to provide a clean slate for re-establishing a traditional patriarchal framework. Mick Broderick (1993) notes that these stories feature survival as their "dominant discursive mode," and function as fantasies of masculine nostalgia through positing their lone, male hero as the viewpoint character of the film. The longing for a fictitious, simple and male-centered golden age lends an almost pastoral layer to films like *I Am Legend* (2007), or *The Book of Eli* (2010), both robinsonades where the patriarchy is finally restored unchallenged by the changes of modern society. *I Am Legend*, for example, opens with a 20-minute sequence which depicts the seemingly idyllic life of Robert Neville and his dog, Sam, in a deserted Manhattan. Although there is menace lurking at the edges of this bright summer day, both as the external threat embodied by the light-sensitive post-human monsters, and the internal trauma suppressed by Neville's brain, the utopian layer is undeniably there. It shows the complexity in which these narratives approach regression into previous historical and economic systems, not only with repulsion, but also with a certain degree of sentimental desire. Similarly, Australian post-apocalyptic films like the *Mad Max* series – with the exception of the fourth installment –, or *The Rover* (2014), while mourning for human civilization, also glorify the figure of the lonely male, unfettered by societal expectations.

Cargo (2017), directed by Ben Howling and Yolanda Ramke, falls into this category of survivalist fiction; it is based on their 2013 short film of the same title. We enter the narrative after the zombie apocalypse has happened. Society is atomized, a large percentage of the population has transformed into brainless corpses-probably due to an infection, although the cause is never detailed-feeding on the few survivors, with everyone fending for themselves. We are introduced to a nuclear family, a father (Andy, played by Martin Freeman), a mother (Kay, played by Susie Porter) and their infant daughter Rosie, who have successfully avoided the infected by living on a riverboat, and staying away from the mainland. The viewer meets them in a stereotypically idyllic scene: the father is fishing, the mother is taking care of the child on a beautiful summer day. Gender roles are assigned and fulfilled according to the patriarchal script for the nuclear family: the man, the paterfamilias, provides for his family while the woman occupies a nurturing position. The aim of their journey is to get to a military base, hoping that a cure for the disease has been found, or that at least the base might provide a safe haven for them from the infected. They still have some way to go when we join the narrative, and as their food is running out, Andy and Kay are forced to forage for edibles in a foundered ship, where Kay is bitten and becomes infected. With 48 hours until she herself is transformed into a zombie, Andy tries to get her to a hospital. Avoiding a zombie standing in the road they suffer an accident, where Kay turns and bites Andy, who in turn kills zombie Kay. The family

quest for survival turns into a race with time, as a doomed Andy embarks on a journey to find safety and a foster family for Rosie before he himself is transformed.

Parallel to this storyline we also follow Thoomi (played by Simone Landers), an indigenous girl who is unable to leave her transformed father behind to go and join her mother and a group of indigenous people who have withdrawn inland and are battling the zombie plague with considerably more success than white Australian society. Andy and Thoomi's paths cross twice: first, when her zombie father causes the road accident that ultimately leads to Andy's infection, and second when Andy finds the girl trapped in a cage, used by the psychopathic Vic (played by Anthony Hayes) as bait to attract zombies, whom Vic then shoots. The second encounter results in Andy's and Thoomi's alliance, and by helping each other Andy finds a family for his child, and Thoomi finds her way back to her community. While the film doubtlessly posits humans as "the true monster threatening civilization" (Bishop, 2010, p.95), on the personal level it explores questions of fatherhood, and deconstructs the colonial prejudice of assigning European cultural values to a higher level than Australian indigenous practices of life.

3.2 Parenthood and gender roles in *Cargo*

Parenthood in general, and fatherhood in particular occupy a central position within the film. We are presented with several parent-child relationships: Andy, Kay and Rosie, Thoomi and her parents, and the family Andy sees on the shore in the first minutes of the film, all provide different options for facing the challenge of the zombie apocalypse. It is ultimately the indigenous family which shows the only viable alternative by embracing the community, and "follow[ing] the old ways," as Etta, a white teacher Andy meets, points out (*Cargo* 2017). Ensuring Rosie's safety is the prime objective of both Andy and Kay, and their deepest fear is their failure to protect her from coming to harm. Kay does not really function as an agent in the narrative, her role is rather to catalyze the situation through her infection and subsequent traumatic absence. The situation Andy is put into extrapolates the fears every parent faces about successful parenthood and providing for their child. Rosie both embodies a specific child, and also becomes synonymous with the concepts of hope and the possibility of a future. In this sense Andy's quest evokes the father-son journey of *The Road*, a 2006 novel written by Cormac McCarthy. Both fathers are desperate to ensure the survival of their child, while both of them are on the verge of death; the Man in *The Road* suffers from an undisclosed disease that causes his slow physical deterioration, while Andy is, as mentioned, living on borrowed time after his infection. The quest for survival is exacerbated by the fact that zombie narratives play with the Jekyll and Hyde trope, and while Andy has to fight off the outside threat, he also has to constantly face and battle the monster within, a fight he is bound to lose.

Cargo, similarly to *The Road*, is marked by the absence of the mother on several levels: Kay's death leaves Andy as the only caretaker of Rosie, and while tragic, it just marks her final objectification, having been denied a say in major decisions, and ultimately refused to end her life as her loss of self is imminent. The choices that Andy makes against her will have lethal consequences for himself and for her, as well, and eventually lead to the destruction of the family. Thoomi's mother, on the other hand, is absent because Thoomi consciously evades her in order to be able to stay with her zombified father, unable to let go despite the rational acknowledgment that she cannot bring him back. Her quest is to realize that her father, and 'white civilization' to which he binds her, has to be left behind, and she has to find a way to accept her own culture and history in order to rejoin her community. Howling and Ramke stated in an interview with Peary (2018) that

> having the Indigenous component in the film, incorporating that culture, looking at Indigenous survivors, there was just a layer there that we thought was quite interesting in having an English man coming into the orbit of these Indigenous characters who are thriving. Just a reflection of Australia's own colonial history which is all quite dark and unresolved and ever-present. (Peary, 2018)

This colonial metaphor runs through the film in several ways. On the one hand, all characters are either white Australians or indigenous Australians; there is no ethnic diversity beyond this dichotomy. The film's portrayal of women is divided along this line, as well. White women are depicted as weak and vulnerable: as mentioned earlier, Kay clearly conforms to patriarchal gender expectations by her subordinate position within the family, and her transformation just marks the endpoint of this trajectory of objectification. Etta, the elderly teacher Andy encounters on his quest for a caretaker for Rosie, has lost her students to either the disease or the bush, and is presumably dying from cancer. Lorraine, the young woman the psychotic Vic introduces as his wife, turns out to be held captive by him, restricted in her movement, and sexually and emotionally exploited and tortured by the man. The unnamed mother of the family on the shore dies without objection when her infected husband decides to kill his wife and children before committing suicide himself. She is not given a choice to continue caring for her children alone, or to continue living when her husband is doomed to die. Finally, Rosie is an infant, unable to fend for herself. Indigenous women, in contrast, are depicted as able agents of their own narrative. Thoomi, as a young girl, is shown to navigate the zombie-infested territory without major problems, surviving the proximity of her transformed father, even caring for him by providing him with meat to eat. Thoomi's mother, while looking for her daughter, is shown as an able warrior, hunting and killing the infected without having to rely on male help and guidance.

3.3 Cultural background and apocalyptic coping strategies

One of the major differences between the white and indigenous characters is their degree of acceptance of the cataclysm: Andy hopes for the safe haven of the military base, and a possible cure for the disease; both are denied as he finds the base destroyed, and the soldiers turned into zombies. Vic is hoarding jewelry he takes off the zombie corpses in preparation for when the world is normalized again, unable to accept that 'normality' as he knows it will never return. The zombies are frequently shown with their heads buried in the ground, or standing in dark places, their faces turned towards the wall, marking their inability to see and accept that the world has changed around them. When society breaks down, the white population is left without an alternative to fall back upon. The indigenous population, on the contrary, is seemingly much better prepared to meet the challenge of the human monsters; they react swiftly to the invasion and develop effective strategies to defend their community against the threat, and preserve their culture intact. The film argues for the superiority of the aboriginal cultural practices, and shows relying on native customs and rituals as the only viable option to survive the catastrophe. The postcolonial overtones of the film point to the fact that the existential threat only comes as a surprise to the colonizers, as the colonized have been facing and battling the prospect of physical and cultural annihilation since Australia's 'discovery' and subsequent colonization in the seventeenth century.

The aboriginal and the white Australian elements are also juxtaposed in terms of their approach to community and communication. White society is atomized into solitary humans or nuclear families which renounce a larger communal existence in favour of isolated entrenchment, and communication gives way to paranoia. Andy is the only character who would be willing to connect, and attempts to do so, but meets

repeated hostile rejection from the white Australians he meets—with the exception of Etta—, first from the family on the shore, then from Vic. Despite the setbacks, and despite his relative openness, he exclusively seeks 'white alternatives,' and only considers Thoomi and the indigenous community as a possible solution to Rosie's survival when all other options have been exploited. It takes their shared journey, and the trust they build, to allow Andy to humanize the girl, and finally entrust her with the care of his daughter. The aboriginal survivors, on the other hand, have established a working community in Wilpena Pound, a valley in South Australia surrounded by a crescent of mountains, and the closing shots show a true pastoral idyll, without the dystopian overtones of the movie's opening. Their success in surviving not only stems from the skills and experience that make them proficient navigators of the cataclysmic environment, but also from the willingness to cooperate, and to use the community's collective strength to counter the zombie threat. Traditional aboriginal body paint signals belonging to the group, apart from functioning as protective magic against the infected. When towards the end of their shared journey Thoomi paints marks on Rosie to mask her scent from the zombies-Andy, by then far into the process of transformation, is no longer in need of protection-, it also signals the integration of Rosie into the aboriginal community.

Andy's quest thus combines coming to terms with his role as single parent, and facing the fear as father that his identity does not only include the nurturing parent, but also the potential of the threatening monster. His final triumph is transforming the lethal threat into a tool that ensures the survival of both Thoomi and Rosie, as they use a zombified Andy as a pack animal to transport them to safety after he succumbs to the infection, dangling a slab of meat in front of his nose as motivation to keep him going. Andy's British background emphatically places him in the position of the colonizer, and the film subverts the colonial narrative by interchanging the markers of conqueror and victim. The dehumanization of Andy by objectifying him and depriving him of his intellect, while simultaneously investing the indigenous characters with agency and humanity, allows for a reparative reenactment of the colonial narrative. Luckily the film does not stop at transposing roles, but also offers a disruption and dissolution of the indigenous-white Australian dichotomy by a fusion of the categories through the figure of Rosie. Her integration into the utopian community presents a possibility where cooperation, community, intercultural communication and peaceful, non-exploitative coexistence with the environment produce a viable and livable future.

4 Conclusion

Cargo uses the zombie apocalypse as a metaphor to call attention to the global economy's detrimental effects on humanity. It uses the zombie trope in line with Romero's *Living Dead* films to comment on the cannibalistic and suicidal consumer practices of modern society. The post-apocalyptic world presented in the film is divided along ethnic lines, and clear preference is given to the cultural practices of the indigenous population in confronting the plague. The strategies of the white survivors, on the other hand, are shown as ineffective, as their atomization into nuclear families, isolation and unwillingness to cooperate inevitably lead to their demise. Fatherhood is challenged through the loss of the mother, the choices and moral dilemmas a single father faces in an extremely hostile environment, and the identity crisis communicated through the zombie infection. Andy's quest to find a home and a caring family for Rosie leads him to overcome prejudice and entrust his daughter to the indigenous community. This instance of intercultural transaction not only marks a subversion and reenactment of the colonial narrative, but also signals moving beyond the colonizer-colonized dichotomy by embracing cooperation, intercultural communication and integration as the only means of survival.

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